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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS, H  
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

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SUBJECT: SENATOR FEINGOLD'S MEETING WITH THAI DEFENSE  
MINISTER THAMMARAK

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary. In a February 20 meeting with visiting Senator Russell Feingold and the Ambassador, Defense Minister Thammarak Issarangkul Na Ayutthaya outlined Thai military modernization efforts, explained that the RTG has not yet made a decision on the purchase of new fighter aircraft and voiced optimism on RTG efforts to combat violence in the South. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On February 20, Senator Russell Feingold, accompanied by the Ambassador, called on Thai Minister of Defense Thammarak Issarangkul Na Ayutthaya. Thammarak began by thanking Senator Feingold for visiting and observed that the large number of senior Thai officers in the room who had received U.S. training signified the close and "very good" U.S.-Thai relationship. Senator Feingold concurred, citing U.S.-Thai collaboration in response to the 2004 tsunami and the importance of the annual Cobra Gold exercise. The Senator emphasized that the close U.S.-Thai partnership would be important in tackling new regional and global threats.

#### MILITARY MODERNIZATION

13. (SBU) Senator Feingold asked Thammarak for an outline of Thai military modernization efforts. Thammarak explained that the Royal Thai Armed Forces had been structured to combat the communist threat of years past, leading to an "oversized" force. The first goal of modernization was to downsize excess personnel. Second, the military must improve its internal education and training. Third, the military must have the right weapons and equipment to meet new threats and challenges. MOD has instituted a new three year procurement and planning cycle to meet this third objective. New equipment procurement must also focus on logistics and long term maintenance needs. In particular, the Thai military was interested in technology transfers with friendly nations.

NO DECISION ON F-16'S, BESIDES, MOD "NOT INVOLVED"

14. (C) In response to Senator Feingold's query on future Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) procurement, Thammarak explained that the RTG is focused on upgrading the current fleet of F-16s. That said, the RTAF will be looking to replace their aging fleet of F-5's, which may involve consideration of several different offers. Thammarak was quick to emphasize, however, that no decision had been made yet. The Defense Minister went on to outline the lengthy procurement process, which he suggested was rooted in a formal RTAF procurement board that would eventually report to a special cabinet committee. "We're (MOD) not involved." Any media reports that a decision has been made already are untrue, he claimed.

#### THE SOUTH

15. (C) Senator Feingold asked for Thammarak's assessment on the violence in the South and the efficacy of RTG strategy and tactics there. Thammarak began by emphasizing that, based on his own "investigation" into the situation, the violence in the South remained an internal affair with no clear links to outside terrorist groups. "We think that we can solve this problem." The southern insurgency arose from the misconduct of state officials. That said, "we have never suppressed Muslims in the South." Thai Muslims have lived under Thai administrative control for years in peace. "Some groups" have used politics, drugs and southern locals to conduct violence. Thammarak emphasized the lack of a specific, unified group behind the violence.

16. (C) When asked if there was a terrorist link to piracy in the Malacca Strait, Thammarak responded no. There are several nationalities involved in piracy there, including Malays and Indonesians, but terrorists "could not control the pirates." Senator Feingold asked Thammarak about the importance of Malaysia to the problem in the South. The Defense minister responded that, given the shared border and history, Malaysia played a key role in any solution to the southern violence. Thai authorities were working closely

with their Malay counterparts, in particular on the issue of dual-citizens involved in the unrest.

17. (C) According to Thammarak, the Southern Province Peace Building Command is playing a key role in coordinating the multiple agencies and ministries involved in the South. The government will consider the recommendations of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), but, in truth "their ideas won't fix everything."

18. (U) Senator Feingold's office cleared this message.

BOYCE